

# A Cold, Dark Night

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**W**e were steaming around a buoy outside the traffic lanes in the Strait of Juan de Fuca. As usual, the evolution was planned from 0001 to 0400 so it wouldn't interfere with more important things.

I, the ship's navigator, would be on the bridge for the entire event. That was an agreement the CO and I had reached during a brief in which we discussed what was needed to get the job done safely. I would assist the OOD and conning officer; I'd act as a safety observer (another set of eyes). The CO had demanded it.

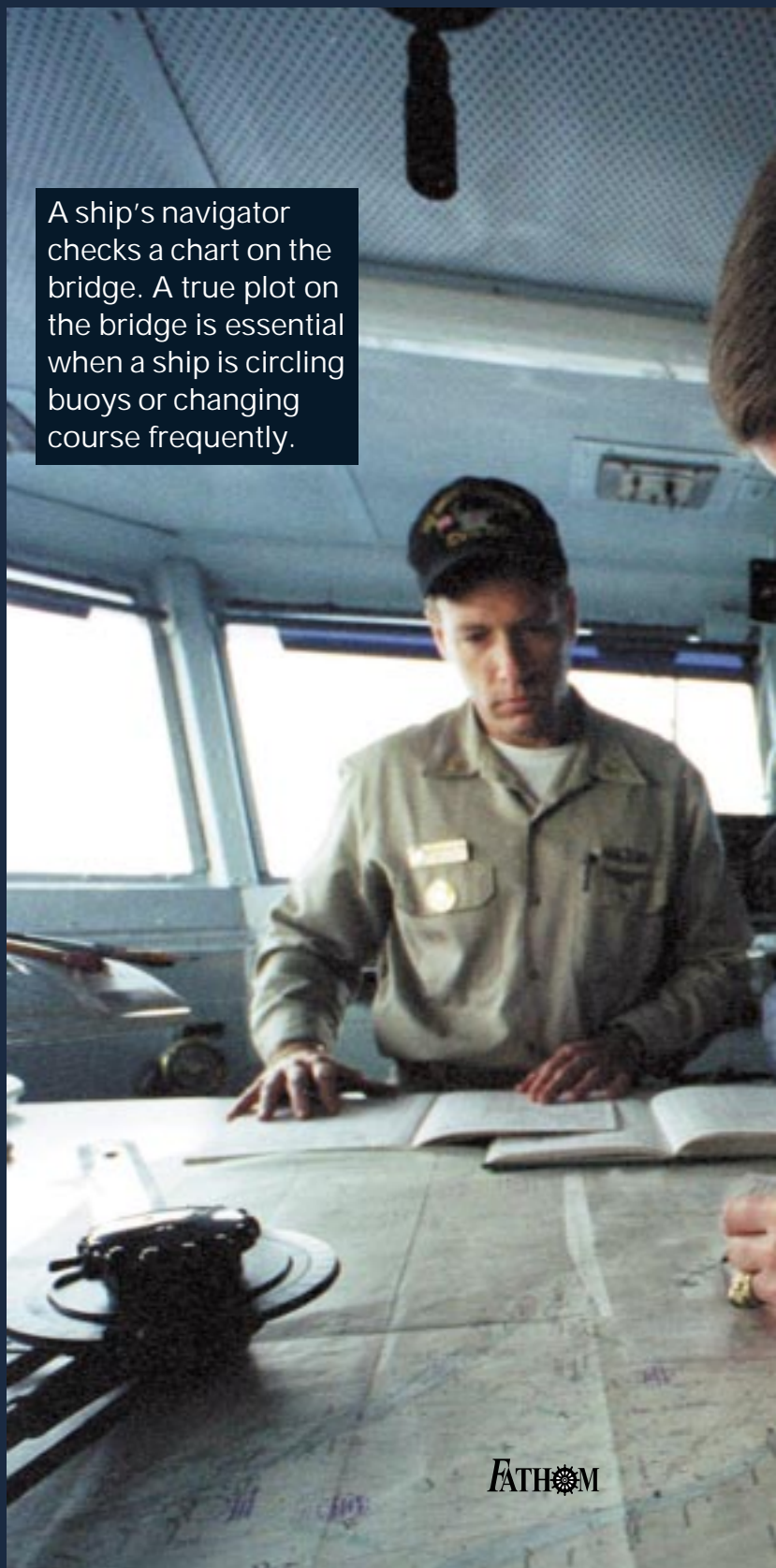
About an hour into the evolution, I realized that mobboards were difficult, confusing and really ineffective. What we needed was a "true" plot on the bridge, like the dead-reckoning tracer in CIC. I decided to plot all contacts on the chart. By freezing the SPA-25G repeater at the same time as a fix, we had time to get all the close contacts plotted in nearly real time.

In another hour, a tug with a tow started to track outside the traffic lanes, toward the area where we were circling. I told the OOD about the contact about 15 minutes before it would become a problem. However, he didn't think it would be a problem, so he kept circling.

As the tug tracked in, we started to hear chatter from it calling a ship outside the lanes. The call was for us, but one of our policies was to keep our hands off the VHF radio, except in an emergency. Besides, the OOD concluded that the tug wasn't calling us. Finally, though, he got nervous enough about the true plot I was maintaining to call the CO.

The CO came to the bridge and looked at the radar, but it wasn't much help, so I showed him the plot on the chart, which immediately grabbed his attention. Shortly thereafter, the tugmaster, now fed up from getting no answer from us, shined a search-

A ship's navigator checks a chart on the bridge. A true plot on the bridge is essential when a ship is circling buoys or changing course frequently.



# I'll Never Forget

Navy photo by PHAN Angela E. Padilla



light into our bridge. That bright light piqued everyone's attention, and we got out of its way. The CPA was no closer than 3,000 yards.

I remember this event like it happened yesterday because it taught me some valuable lessons:

- ✓ The CO had decided it would be wise to have another set of eyes on the bridge. I didn't like the idea of staying up all night, but that was my job as navigator.

- ✓ A chain of events leads up to a mishap. In this case, we broke the chain. First and foremost, the OOD was trained well enough that when he got nervous, he called the CO.

- ✓ A true plot on the bridge is essential when circling buoys or changing course frequently; tools are available to make this happen. Aboard my current ship, I have a command-and-decision console that gives me a true plot, but I still have quartermasters plot contacts on a chart when I need them. This way, I stay in practice and maintain my situational awareness.

- ✓ The VHF radio is a tool you should use without thinking about it. I train OODs to use it like they're talking face to face.

- ✓ I grill OODs on rules of the road. While doing visit, board, search and seizure operations, I got a chance to talk to numerous merchant captains about rules of the road. Those discussions were very informative.

Why did I share this tale with you? Because I want you to know that the collision reported in the July-September 2000 *Fathom* wasn't the first time in which a ship had a problem circling a buoy. The difference is that we broke the chain of events. Perhaps some of our lessons learned can be incorporated into your operational risk management training. ☺